OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

ELIZABETH OF ALL SAINTS

By HERMAN PFEIFER

UNBELIEVABLE, unfilial, monstrous though it seems, Elizabeth did not desire to go home for the holidays. It had always been her wish to spend one Christmas in the serene atmosphere of the gray, rambling old Convent of All Saints, which, like a gaunt but kindly sentinel, stands on the brow of a hill overlooking the quaint old French-Canadian town of the same name.

She was of a different faith, and had been sent to the convent out of deference for her French and not for her religion; but among the two hundred odd pupils enrolled there, not one more dearly loved the draughty old convent, the sweet-voiced nuns, the courtyard lapped in mystic silence, save for droning bee or melodious chant, with its sun-dial and its demoralized paths of brick, disjointed and dislocated by encroaching sweet-williams, gardenias, marigolds, and rose geraniums, all of which, since they craved the light and sun, and did no particular mischief, were allowed by the gentle lay sisters to grow at their own sweet will—very much, so Father Augustin jocosely said, like the pupils.

Comfortable, rosy and plump, shrewd yet kindly, dry, spiritual, and yet somehow lovably humorous was Father Augustin, and versed as deeply in the human heart as in his theologies; and it was him Elizabeth loved best of all. It was Father Augustin who divined that the grief which as early as October sent Elizabeth to the chapel to seek solace in prayer twice or thrice a day was more than a surface grief.

Not being of the good Abbe's faith, the path which might have led directly from her heart to his through confession was denied her, and Father Augustin cast about to devise other means of probing and curing the wound which the quick instinct of the priest told him existed.

One afternoon, early in November, during the recreation hour when pupils and nuns played games on the large lawn at the side of the convent, Elizabeth alone was absent, and the Abbe knew, as well as if he had looked, that she was on her knees in the chapel.

The chapel gave upon the courtyard garden, deserted and silent at this hour as the grave. Here Father Augustin waited until Elizabeth emerged from the cloister. He heard her light footstep crackling among the brown leaves. She stood beside the seat of crumbling marble, hung with ivy, on which he sat.

"Father Augustin!"

"Elizabeth, I desire to speak with thee, my child."

She sat down beside him, a vague, misty pain looking out of the eyes she had lifted to his face.

"My daughter, I have seen thee grow from childhood to all but womanhood. I know that thy thoughts are pure, thy heart undefiled, thyself as sinless as blood and flesh can be. Yet day after day I see thee creep to the altar and pour out thy heart in prayer so passionate that the burden which impelled it, if cause and effect be commensurate, must be one which a maid of thy years, standing upon the threshold of life, should be ignorant of. Speak frankly to me, my daughter, as thou wouldst speak with thine own father, were he here."

Elizabeth burst into a gusty fit of weeping.

"Nay," she cried, "if I were to speak to you as to my own father, I would not speak at all, for he has turned a deaf ear to all my entreaties. Stone, rock, iron, and adamant has he been. But you, dear Father Augustin, will understand."

With some hesitation and many self-imposed interruptions Elizabeth told her tale. It was the same old commonplace, trite story—so banal and stale to us who know the world's agony, and who have learned to pass a poor soul struggling in one of the whirlpools of life with a shrug of the shoulder and a sigh; so new, acute, and unique to those to whom it comes in the springtime of life, when through the floodgates of youth, meant to admit joy and love only, the bitter bereavement enters.

Elizabeth's father, before leaving France, Elizabeth then being but a tiny girl of four, had exchanged a pledge with a friend of his, the father of a boy of six, that the boy and girl, on reaching manhood and womanhood, should marry. And the engagement was to be celebrated the coming Christmas.

"And how, dear Father Augustin," concluded the girl, "can I love someone I have never seen, of whom I know not whether he be gentle or rough, overbearing or generous, truthful or false—how, I say, can I love him? And not loving him—how can I marry him? For is not marriage a sacrament only when it consecrates love?"

Father Augustin furrowed his brow. Marriage without love he held to be but one whit less vile than love without marriage. Yet this he could not tell this spotless slip of a girl.

"Before I can answer thee," he said, "I must know one thing. Dost thou love another?"

Elizabeth shook her head in vigorous negation.

"Where was I to have met such another, dear Father Augustin?" she asked. "All my life have I lived here in the convent, excepting the annual summer vacation, which I spent at mountain or seashore resorts, where there are more interesting matters to do than to speak to strange young men."

Father Augustin stroked his beardless lip and hid a smile. He was accustomed to think rapidly, and rapidly and to the purpose he thought. Choosing to forget that he had left unanswered an embarrassing question, he said:

"Be content, my child. I will try to find some means of lightening thy burden. At least I will endeavor to stave off the catastrophe until next spring. And—would it please thee?—I think thou hast expressed the wish in former years to spend thy Christmas holidays here with us?"

"Father Augustin!" cried Elizabeth, "if you can bring that to pass, verily I will believe you are wizard enough to save me from that hateful marriage as well."

Father Augustin smiled a sly, sagacious smile, and his blue eyes were shrewdly inscrutable.

"We will live," he said, "and we will see."

A fortnight later it was announced that Father Augustin was forced to travel all the way to New York on a matter of business. But the world would not have accounted this a truthful description, since the affair which took him away from All Saints involved neither money nor merchandise nor commerce. But to the unworldly, simple-hearted old priest the breaking of a girl's heart was more serious a matter than the miscarriage of argosies.

After a long and dreary wait in a heavily furnished anteroom dimly lighted through the elaborate red-and-green shade of an electric lamp, Father Augustin was shown into the sanctum of the great banker, Elizabeth's father. Just as he went in two potentates of the world of finance passed out, and behind them streamed thick circles of pungent smoke, as the smell of naphtha loiters behind a launch or an automobile. The sanctum, too, was filled with the fumes of tobacco and wine. How different, thought Father Augustin, from the sanctuary of All Saints, and he pictured Elizabeth at prayer in the incense-filled, candle-lighted chapel, her virginal head bowed above the clasped, tapering fingers. A quick stab of pain pierced his heart when he remembered that this heavy-jowled, greedy-fingered human machine held the strand of Elizabeth's destiny in his hands.

Elizabeth's father came forward toward the priest with outstretched hand and the manner of exaggerated friendliness which is but a mask for indifference.

"How do you do?" he said, and, perceiving the gravity of the priest's demeanor, added, "Is anything wrong with Elizabeth? Is she ill?"

Wondering, Father Augustin withheld his hand.

"If you thought your child was ill," he said, gently, "how could you bear to wait a good half-hour before learning if your fear was unfounded or not?"

The banker's coarse face clouded with annoyance.

"We who play the game," he said, "must play it in season and out. Ten minutes suffice sometimes to wipe away a fortune or to make one."

"Ten minutes," said Father Augustin, "also suffice for a soul's undoing.

"What talk is this of a 'soul's undoing,'" said Elizabeth's father, impatiently. "Is Elizabeth ill or well? Of her 'undoing' there can be no fear."

"She is in good health," said the Abbe. "And of her 'undoing,' at least of her own accord, there can, as you say, be no fear."

Then, without further preamble, the Abbe launched boldly upon the waters he had come to trouble. He spoke simply, in the homely, straightforward way in which he exhorted his parishioners; fusilades of impassioned rhetoric would not have touched the famous banker; but the calm, dispassionate manner in which Father Augustin set forth his brief, his slightly exotic English, the charm of his serene personality, the exaltation which breathed from him, and which his colloquial manner by no means expunged, moved the financier more than he cared to show.

Perhaps, too, indirectly, though not without deliberation, the deft touch of the Abbe's homely eloquence awoke memories in the other of the pearl-and-silver rose-garden of youth, through which all pass before entering the somber fastnesses of manhood and womanhood—peasant, merchant, soldier, financier, and—who knows?—perhaps even a priest; for else, how could the good Abbe so certainly have shaken the citadel of worldliness and cynicism in which the financier sat intrenched?

"After all," he said, as the Abbe concluded, "I am her father and must decide. Young Gaston Devereaux is a son of one of the noblest families in France. He is capable, wealthy, of irreproachable character. What more can Elizabeth ask?"

"Only this," said Father Augustin, quietly, "that he light the divine spark in her heart without which marriage is a mockery and love the synonym of lust."

"There is no reason why the two should not fall in love," objected the financier. "I have seen Gaston Devereaux, and he has all the outer accoutrements to win a woman's heart as also the stabler qualities which guarantee happiness."

Father Augustin smiled sorrowfully, and in his wistful, wooing voice he spoke of the quaint, sweetly perverse, wild-rose quality of the heart, which clamors for romance and will have it at all costs. The land of love is the land of adventure, and who so meek of mind, so lowly of spirit as not to resent having the veil of mystery torn rudely away before the awakening by an alien hand? Only if our discoveries are our own will they yield the aroma of romance, and the friend or lover found without parental intervention or scene-shifting will be closer kith of soul and dearer kin of flesh than one who is heralded by prolific introduction and fastidious visiting-card on regulation salver.

Not a muscle moved in the great banker's face or in his flabby eyelids, as moving his chair away from the Gargantuan rosewood desk, from which scowling dragons with gargoyle heads looked forth, he queried:

"What do you propose?"

Father Augustin told him.

Thus it happened that Elizabeth was permitted to spend Christmas at the convent, and, as if the elements were conjoining with the rest of the world to please her, it began to snow shortly before three o'clock on Christmas Eve. Like a shower of righteousness the feathery flakes descended. It had rained in the morning, and the wind which had whipped the rain against the somber front of the building increased to a gale when the rain stopped, and its boisterous breath transformed the lichen-covered walls to frosted silver, so that icicles hung upon every cornice. Then, the wind having pranced and howled and wept its fill, it settled down to snow in the orthodox Christmas fashion.

Elizabeth, peering forth from her window-seat in the library, said:

"*Le bon Dieu* has caused all this to come to pass for me, because I am here this holy night, for surely never before was there so beautiful a Christmas Eve. Amen."

The next morning Elizabeth said her prayers kneeling upon a chair, so that she might look out upon God's perishable snow-sculpture while saying them. After dressing, breakfast, and mass, Elizabeth and Sister Veronica, who was the youngest sister in the convent, set themselves to shoveling snow. Something near the roof caught Elizabeth's eye, and she clapped her hands delightedly, like any child. Then all the nuns must come and see the wonderfully funny thing Elizabeth had discovered, and, when they were all assembled, and stood huddled together in the narrow bit of path which had been cleared of snow, Elizabeth pointed upward to one of the niches in the building, and cried:

"See how unesthetic Saint Peter is. There is an icicle on the tip of his nose."

At this some of the nuns were shocked, or pretended to be, and others were amused, and still others shook their fingers at Elizabeth in gentle admonishment, but little Sister Veronica laughed so heartily that the tears came with the laughter, and Mother Philippa, the Mother Superior, waddled away as swiftly as her embonpoint would permit, lest Sister Veronica's hilarity arouse her own risibilities and she suffer a diminution of dignity thereby.

Later, when Elizabeth came into the reception-room, her eyes shining and her cheeks red as tomatoes, she found Father Augustin and Mother Philippa in serious consultation. She was about to withdraw, but Mother Philippa said:

"Come in, my child. The good Father had a wonderful adventure last night after leaving the chapel."

Father Augustin raised his hands in deprecation.

"It pleased the good God," he said, "to allow me to be the unworthy instrument of saving a life last night," and in his usual placid, semi-vivacious manner he related how a young man had broken through the small millpond directly back of his dwelling with a touring car, and had been caught in the ice so that he had been unable to disentangle himself, and would no doubt have perished miserably if Father Augustin had not found him on leaving the chapel.

Mother Philippa had listened with some show of impatience to the Abbe's prolix tale and Elizabeth's questioning.

"And now the good Father Augustin thinks it would be pleasant for thee to have the stranger call this afternoon to relieve thee of the monotony of the day, as the roads are still impassable and he cannot continue on his journey until morning."

"That is it, precisely," said Father Augustin, matching the finger-tips of one hand against those of the other. "It seemed to me, my daughter, that the young man had happened along as a sort of Christmas gift for you."

Mother Philippa interrupted the Abbe acidly.

"What talk is this, Father Augustin, to call a young man a Christmas gift for a young girl?"

Elizabeth smiled and settled herself comfortably on a low stool against the Abbe's knee. A good-natured fracas between the Father and Mother was an entertainment of sheer delight to the beholder.

"Tut, tut," responded Father Augustin. "It grieves me, Mother Philippa, that you should misconstrue my words. Elizabeth, in spite of her love for us all, must surely be a bit lonesome today for lack of younger society, and the companionship of any young secular person, lad or girl, must be welcome to her."

Mother Philippa bit her lip. There was no resisting Father Augustin once he had made up his mind.

It was the same old commonplace, trite story.

And very evidently he had made up his mind to have his way today. Still she fenced, and so there followed a great pother and hubbub, one of the innumerable friendly battles betwixt the good Abbe and the worthy Mother. The number of objections which Mother Philippa had at hand to interpolate were truly astounding. The two parried, lunged, riposted in this duel of words, and finally, when the good Mother seemed all but vanquished and routed, she resiliently bounded back to her first argument.

How could she allow a good-looking, strange young man to enter the sacrosanct convent in so unconventional a way?

"Perhaps," Elizabeth put in slyly, "perhaps he is ugly. Is he, Father Augustin?"

"Mother Philippa can easily convince herself," said Father Augustin, dryly. "The stranger awaits her verdict in the antechamber."

Mother Philippa sat bolt upright and cried wrathfully:

"Father Augustin, you know that one can hear every word that is spoken here in the antechamber. Why did you not caution me?"

"My good Mother Philippa," responded the Abbe, meekly, "I could not guess that you, of all persons, would speak of anyone in a way that you would not desire him to be cognizant of."

But Mother Philippa was really quite angry, and the Abbe's face fell. Elizabeth, who cared nothing about having a visitor, but everything that her dear Father Augustin should be disappointed in giving her what he considered a little pleasure, gallantly saved the day.

"Dear Mother Philippa," she cried, "I have an inspiration. For all we know, he may not have heard a word. He may have been asleep."

"At half-past eleven in the morning?" asked Mother Philippa, suspiciously.

"Think of what he went through last night," Elizabeth reminded her. "One is so apt to be fatigued after being exposed to the cold for a long time. Let me look," and before Mother Philippa could stop her she ran to the arched doorway and drew the portieres aside.

There, in a comfortable chair, sat a young man, slim, tall, pale, and quite aggressively handsome, and his eyelids lay upon his eyes. Around his mouth flickered a suspicious quiver, and when Elizabeth saw what he was clad in she laughed aloud. He wore a pair of Father Augustin's trousers, and one of his coats and clerical collars, and as Father Augustin was broad and portly, and the stranger was gaunt and lean, the collar stood about his neck like a stock, and the clothes hung upon him as upon a clothes-horse or a scarecrow.

Elizabeth, into whom the spirit of mischief had entered, chose the latter comparison.

"Why, Mother Philippa," she cried, "he is a perfect scarecrow." At that the young man opened his eyes and shot her a reproachful look, and Elizabeth reddened more from an effort to suppress her merriment than from embarrassment. She continued shamelessly:

"As I said, Mother Philippa, he is fast asleep."

An insouciant smile flitted over the young man's face. Accepting her suggestion, he again closed his eyes.

Elizabeth continued naughtily:

"I think he came here prepared to sleep, for he seems to wear pajamas."

"Pajamas!" roared Father Augustin, "Pajamas!—fie, fie, Elizabeth! It is my best frock he is wearing."

The reclining figure of the stranger was lapped in impenetrable repose as Mother Philippa, who had risen, approached him. Fixedly, and not disapprovingly, she regarded the recumbent figure which now was heaving gently. At last she spoke.

"A scarecrow, Elizabeth? Is this your idea of a scarecrow?"

But before Elizabeth was forced into the ordeal of giving an ultimate verdict, the young man, with every appearance of awakening leisurely from his slumbers, yawned incontinently, and then sprang to his feet, quite vivaciously awake and very evidently overcome with remorse and embarrassment at the awkward nap in which he had permitted himself to indulge.

Elizabeth had once rightly said that Mother Philippa, when she chose to be gracious, looked more like a Dowager Duchess in exaggerated mourning than a nun. The young man, so fiercely objected to while an unknown quantity, she now readily enough accepted as a guest for the afternoon.

When, after dinner, Sister Veronica came to tell Elizabeth that the stranger had presented himself, she found a very different-appearing young man from the pajama-clad figure of the morning. His eyes twinkled mischievously as he said:

"I must apologize for being such a scarecrow this morning. I came appareled as I did at Father Augustin's express command."

Elizabeth looked about fearfully. She had expected one of the Sisters to be at her elbow, and she was frightened almost into silence at finding herself practically alone with the stranger, for Sister Veronica, though in the room, had seated herself in a remote alcove with a prayer-book.

"It was clever of you," said Elizabeth, "to take my hint as to being asleep."

"It was far more clever of you to convey the hint."

Elizabeth felt uncertain of her ground. She had her misgivings as to the questionable propriety of her behavior during the morning's adventure. She had allowed herself to be carried away by her mischievous impulses, and she blushed furiously as she realized what construction her conduct might have been liable to in the eyes of a young man who was not "nice." This made her a little hostile toward the stranger, for whom she cared not a jot or tittle—or had not until then, for it was difficult to cultivate stoical indifference in the presence of that sparkling personality, whose eyes were soft, whose manner and smile were alike irresistible, and whose long and clean-cut lines were garbed immaculately.

Then, remembering the ecstatic mood of the evening before, she experienced a curious sensation, for she was a little jealous of herself, a little covetous to regain the exalted height from which she had unawares fallen over-night, and which had transformed her into a disembodied spirit of joy, akin to the snow that sears and the flame that shrivels, a thing eternal and yet elusive.

As a matter of self-respect, she volunteered:

"It was very indecorous of me to act as I did this morning, but Father Augustin was responsible. He does so love to tease Mother Philippa. I just could not help playing into his hands."

She was very charming as she stood there, her eyes softly shining, the color mounting higher and higher on her cheeks, while she essayed a justification of the morning's boisterous mood. She wore a white lingerie dress trimmed with bows of pale-blue ribbons, the only finery allowed the convent girls, and to the stranger she seemed the impersonation of sweet, pristine maidenhood as she stood before him, hands clasped, her bosom heaving very lightly, her cheeks aflame, a semi-smile circling about lips and eyes. And this maidenliness, which he had not suspected in the morning, when she had seemed a veritable hoyden in her rough white sweater and fur cap and tumbled hair, led him to be cautious against becoming personal too quickly.

"Father Augustin was very good to me last night," and he talked about his misadventure and the courage Father Augustin had displayed in coming to his rescue alone.

They sat down together on the four-yards-long, rep-covered, mahogany sofa, with lyre-shaped arms and back, he lounging comfortably in one corner, she sitting miles away, very, very erect, upon the edge of the farthermost corner, rather frightened at thus entertaining all by herself.

She exerted a strange charm on him as she sat there so stiff and prim and virginal, but he dared not keep his eyes upon her for too long a space, lest she take fright and fly away. But presently, as she became more at ease, her frigidity fell away from her and he perceived to his delight that she was even lovelier when she unbent than when erect and cold.

They sparred a little—she was too bright to be insipidly amiable—and there was a little of the innocent coquetry of youth, so often a prelude to the more sonorous passages of life, and her mood veered and shifted from the evanescence of pure girlishness to the semblance of mature dignity which would invest the full-grown woman she would one day be.

All the while Sister Veronica sat in the remote alcove, nodding over prayer-book and rosary.

By the time the old-fashioned, wrought-iron grandfather's clock struck one for the half-hour between five and six, the divine spark had fluttered from eye to eye, the immortal beatitude had brushed their hearts with seraph wings, and as the stranger rose to go, and they stood side by side, all they felt was wonder that the mute music which throbbed in their breasts could not, by dint of its immensity, make itself audible to their ears as well. They were amazed that the ordinary channels of speech, that ordinary words, must still serve them.

"Father Augustin exacted punctuality of me in leaving at this hour," he said. "To-morrow may I call again?"

Smiling, Elizabeth breathed a confused, happy "yes." Then she asked, "So you stay over another day?"

He replied with impassioned earnestness:

"If you will consent to see me, Father Augustin has promised to put me up all the week."

Elizabeth flushed deliciously.

"Of that we will speak to-morrow," she said, confusedly. "Before you go, Mr. Stranger, will you not tell me your name and hear mine?"

He replied, haltingly:

"Your first name I know, and the rest we must refer to Father Augustin." He became grave, almost somber. "He has been very good to us, the dear Abbe." Then, as if fearing to say too much, he left Elizabeth's side abruptly. At the door he faced her once more.

"For to-night," he said, "think of me as a stranger, and you to me shall be Elizabeth of All Saints."

Elizabeth stood alone and quiet, quite still in the center of the large room into which the gentle twilight was gradually filtering, and her eyes were luminous, almost as if phosphorescent, with the high-tide of happy understanding. But, being human and a woman, she desired confirmation to follow immediately in the wake of hope.

Down the long, chill, marble-paved corridor she flitted with will-o'-the-wisp grace. She went its extreme length. Softly she pushed open the library door. At the Gothic window, book in hand, but not reading, sat Father Augustin. He did not hear her as she entered.

Elizabeth knelt at his side upon a tapestry-covered foot-rest and whispered, "Father Augustin!"

He started as one who had been waked from a deep slumber.

"My daughter," he said, and stroked the girl's hair.

"Father Augustin," she repeated. The inexplicable joy that invaded her was pulling her in all directions, and she did not know, in her experience, from which corner to proceed. She plucked up resolution.

"We had such a pleasant afternoon," she said, shyly.

"How did thou find the young man, eh?"

"So-so," said Elizabeth. Her heart was thump-thumping. "Dear Father Augustin, what—what is the stranger's name?"

"His name?" queried Father Augustin, starting up. "His name?" he repeated, naively, as if the possession of a name on the stranger's part were a wholly unsuspected and remarkable fact. "His name! *Eh bien*, by and by I shall remember it. Thou saidst, I believe, that thou thinkest well of him?"

"I think him charming," said Elizabeth, with a deep flush.

"Charming, *eh bien!*" Father Augustin tilted back the girl's chin and gazed long and deeply into the pure, untroubled eyes.

"And does the charming young man stay over till to-morrow?" he asked.

"He stays all week, dear Father Augustin," whispered the girl.

"That is well. His name—I remember it now—'tis strange, my daughter, how names loiter away from the memory and then saunter back again as we grow older. His name—why, child, what ails thee?"

For Elizabeth had covered her face with her hands and her shoulders were heaving with sobs.

"Dear Father Augustin," she whispered, "how kind you are, how good, how well you remember how it feels to be young! You need not tell me the stranger's name, for I have guessed it. It is Gaston Devereaux."

She began to cry softly, her head leaning against the old priest's shoulder; and Father Augustin smiled his gentle, shrewdly kind smile. Of what he said to her she caught only stray fragments, for joy shutters and bars the windows of the soul quite as much as grief. Perhaps he told her minutely of the campaign he had planned in her behalf, of which the successful end had flashed upon her like a sunburst. Perhaps, neglecting the immaterial details, he spoke only of those things which the tongue of even a saintlike old priest can touch only in the silver borderland of twilight, when a sublime peace, a holy joy, or a sacred sorrow fills every lane and bypath of heart and soul.

Presently Father Augustin ceased speaking, and Elizabeth ceased weeping. She was about to speak when she caught sight of the Abbe's face, illumined by the last scant light of the brief December day. Though his eyes were moist, there was a smile on his lips, and through the mist in his kind, shrewd eyes he was gazing over the snow-sheeted landscape, gazing over the dismal white expanse into the purpling land of youth, with its eternal fairy bowers and undying roses.

Something told Elizabeth that although the smile on his lips was for her and her future, the tears in his eyes were for himself and his past.

Gently, without speaking, she laid a kiss on the shriveled hand of the priest and stole from the room.